



A PERFECT STRANGER.

BY E. NESBIT.

Illustrated by FRANCES EWAN.

THE dusty road lay white before her, the dusty hedges retreating swiftly on either side were rarely broken by tree or gate. Far away to each side lay the placid pastures of the marshes, where the quiet beasts grazed and the sheep cropped the short, sweet grass. The sedge whispered in the dykes, and now and then raised its soft voice as a wild duck or a moorhen rustled from the shelter of it. The scattered farms, red walled, with yellow lichen on roof and fence, seemed asleep in the hush of the moon. The frank face of the country smiled compassionately at the girl who chose whirling wheels and a dusty road rather than the infinite peace that lies between green pasture and blue sky. And Alexa saw it all—the beauty, the smile, the compassion; and the world seemed very good to her. The roads were perfect, her bicycle was running like a willing live thing. Her dress was pretty, her hat shady, and the young blood in her rejoiced in the strength of her young limbs, the vision of her young eyes. Far ahead the red roofs of a village gathered close about a grey church, like children round their mother's knees. Alexa glanced at the sketching-block strapped to her handle-bar.

"I will stop at that village," she said, "whether it's Ivychurch or not."

And still the white road rushed back under her wheels, and the white hedges gave place to grey, lichened fences guarding the winding road from the reed-filled dykes that now bordered it.

The village, like the farms, seemed asleep. The little gardens were full of flowers—sunflowers, asters, marigolds, with here and

there the great white-and-gold lily, looking, amid the homely snapdragons and nasturtiums, like some beautiful Court lady astray in a peasants' fair.

Alexa wheeled her bicycle in through the grey gate of the churchyard, propped it against the wall, and walked up the brick-path to the church.

"But this is magnificent," she said, and indeed it was. For the most part early English, with a Norman doorway and a turret hard to date, the great church, built long ago for the needs of many souls long since at rest, triumphantly outfaced the degradation of three or four late perpendicular windows, and stood in its grey stone, still stately and splendid. The lichen, that in the marsh softens caressingly all brick and stone-work, had painted the old stones a soft and pleasant colour, and on the tower and the strangely shaped turret hung great bulging masses of shining ivy.

Alexa walked round the church, noting every dripstone, every carved corbel, every moss-grown buttress.

"What a church," she said, "to find on the very first day! 'Ivy Church' looked good on the map, certainly; but, then, so often good names turn out to be only yellow brick and galvanised iron, and the church is churchwarden-Gothic built in the wicked sixties."

In the meadow beyond the church the girl found the right point of view for her sketch; she worked quickly, with firm, clean touches, and as she worked the wording of the descriptive article to accompany the sketch began to arrange itself in her mind. It was a glorious idea, this—a bicycle tour through Romney Marsh, by way of holiday—

and the series of articles and sketches, "Churches of the Marshlands," would pay for the holiday over and over again. Alexa wondered why she had never thought of this before. Hitherto she had worked at her writing and illustrating in her little London flat, and spent a quiet and straitened fortnight at some cheap seaside place. But now, since she had a bicycle, all things seemed possible. She finished the sketch and went to look at the church. The big iron ring that served as handle to the west door turned easily in her hand, and the heavy grey oak swung slowly inwards.

"They don't lock up the church, then," she said; "that looks as if the people cared for it a little, and liked to come in to rest and be quiet for a while sometimes, even on work-days."

But when she stood within the church she perceived that the church door had not been left open because anybody cared. The structure of the church was as fine within as without; seven early English arches on either side of the nave divided the side aisles from the centre. The middle of the church was fitted with heavy, square, wooden pews, which, very long ago, had been painted a dull drab colour. The backs of these pews reached almost to the shoulders of the arches. Alexa trod softly on the broken stones and tiles of the central aisle and near the chancel found a way to the south aisle. This was a mere lumber shed. There were broken chairs and dirty tin candlesticks, rotting chests crammed with mouldering papers and parchments—"Priceless parish records, I shouldn't wonder!" said Alexa angrily. There were piles of old books, and crumbling, dry, brown evergreens in heaps. "I suppose somebody decorated the church when it was built, and these things have been here ever since—oh!"

From behind a heap of lumber in which a rusty fender and a wheelbarrow took leading parts someone rose up—a young man in flannels—with curling brown hair and a cavalier moustache.

"I am afraid I frightened you," he said, when the gravedigger's tools disturbed by his sudden rising had settled in rattling protest on the broken tiles of the aisle.

"I saw that you didn't see me, and as you were talking to yourself——"

"Was I talking aloud? I was only thinking what a burning shame it is to let this wonderful old place go to rack and ruin like this——"

"It *is* a shame," he answered; "and

there are most astonishingly lovely things here, too. There's a dear little brass under that rubbish—I was trying to unearth it." He looked longingly at the rubbish heap.

Alexa's eyes brightened. "Oh, do you think we might?" she said. "I have some paper and heel-ball, and I should so like to take a rubbing of it?"

The young man looked at her more attentively. This sort of girl, without shyness, as without affectation, was new in his experience. She was like a man, he reflected, in the frankness of her address, her simple acceptance of the bond of a common interest between them. That "we" of hers was charming, he thought.

"I think we might," he answered, and lifting the wheelbarrow trundled it to a remote corner.

When he came back she spoke, her arms full of the withered wreaths.

"I'll clear off these things if you'll do the heavy ones. You see, I'm doing some articles on Kentish churches, and the brass would come in nicely——"

That was a feminine touch he noted. Men do not begin to talk of their work at once to perfect strangers. But women are so pleased and surprised to find that they can earn their own living, that they speak of their work with the insistent, artless pride of clever children.

He found an old broom among the litter, and when at last the brass lay bare he swept the dust from it. Then she dropped on her knees and dusted the little figure with her handkerchief.

"And *that's* like a man," thought he.

Then she looked helplessly about her for something on which to rub her begrimed fingers. He held out his own handkerchief quite simply.

"That's feminine of her," said he to himself.

Alexa secured the rubbing of the tinsured figure with the folded hands and strait cassock, and while she rubbed he held the paper for her and they talked. She was entirely at her ease; it was quite natural to her to talk to an intelligent human being with interests like her own. But the young man, whose upbringing had been among women of a narrower and more formal type, found the situation novel, with a touch of romance in it even.

Alexa spoke her mind freely as to the iniquity of parson and churchwardens, and he listened, smiling a little awkwardly, but endorsing to the full her condemnations.

"But you don't know the worst yet," he said, when the brass rubbing was finished. "Come and see the north aisle." If the south aisle was a wilderness, this was a desert, and a desert swept and garnished. The old, flat tombs were boarded over, tables and forms outraged the beauty of arch and window above them, and, worse than all, an American stove squatted black and sordid in the lady-chapel, and stuck its blackpipe straight up through the rafters of the wonderful old roof. On the wall were hung those oval, black boards, with white texts painted on them, in which the piety of the Georgian period did so greatly delight. He pointed to one of these, just by the American stove, and she read, "How dreadful is this place!" They looked at each other and laughed. Then Alexa remembered that this, however disguised, was a church, and that in church you must not laugh, so she led the way to the porch. Pausing there she said—

"I'm awfully glad I met you. You've told me lots about the church I didn't know, and you found the brass. Thank you ever so much. Now I'm going to have my lunch here under the yew tree, and then I must go on. I want to get another church in to-day. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he said mechanically. "I wish I could give you some lunch, but——"

"Oh, I have my sandwiches on the machine. I shall be all right, thanks."

She stood waiting. Why didn't the man go?

"Look here," he said desperately. "I've been here three days; it's a dead-and-alive place, and you are the first person I've seen who could exchange a word with me on any but farming subjects. Would it be—would you mind—I wish you would let me stay and have lunch with you."

"He blushes generously," she thought, and aloud she said, her surprise showing only very slightly in her pretty eyebrows—

"All right, there's plenty for two."

"In one moment," he said, and disappeared round the corner of the church. Alexa sat down with her back against a convenient buttress under the shade of the yew.

"Have I perchance stumbled on a lunatic?" she asked herself, "or is it merely the boredom of Ivychurch?"

Anyway, bored or lunatic, he is very well informed, and—oh, yes, he's all right." He returned very quickly—she wondered how near his house could be—with a basket, containing cold pie, cake, ripe pears, and a bottle of thin claret.

"Here's my contribution," he said gaily.

And this was how Alexa found herself picknicking in a churchyard with a perfect stranger. They fell to talking again over the pie and sandwiches, and the more he talked the better Alexa liked him. When at last she led her bicycle through the church-gates she said to herself, "I'm sorry I shall never see him any more!"



"Her bicycle was running like a willing live thing."

But he said to her, "Shall I never see you again?"

"The world is small," she said cheerfully. "Good-bye. Thank you so much about the brass!" And with whirling wheels and a flash of grey skirt she was gone. He stood looking after her till the bicycle faded round

"I will write a curt, plain-spoken note," she said, "and tell the man what I think of him." But she wrote in a white heat of anger and indignation, and though the letter was plain-spoken enough it was certainly not short. It was addressed to the rector of Ivychurch. It reminded him of his income,



"Here's my contribution," he said gaily.

the corner of the last house, and then went back to the churchyard to think of her. He lay under the yew tree, thinking, till the shadows began to lengthen in earnest. He was young, and to him that day had revealed many things.

Alexa laid that night at a little inn ten miles from Ivychurch. Before she slept she borrowed pen and ink from the motherly landlady and wrote a letter.

of his duties to the parishioners and to the church. "You have held this living for thirty years," said the angry letter, "and you have suffered your church to become a rubbish heap and a disgrace. I write this so that you may know that someone is left

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who knows of your wickedness, and who will protest against it." She signed her name with a vehement flourish, and next day she posted the letter.

When the rector received that letter, he read it, and re-read it, and rumbled his hair helplessly with his hands.

But within a month of its arrival masons were at work in the old church.

II.

ALEXA was very dull indeed. It is a fine thing to earn your own living and be independent, but a little lonely flat in London is a poor place to spend Christmas in, and Alexa had no relations. She looked up from her book two days before the loneliest day of all, and saw that the sun was turning her green serge curtains a fine yellow.

"How pretty Ivychurch must be looking!" she said. "I will go and spend Christmas in the marshes."

And she went.

She stayed at the same little inn where she had written that passionate letter to the rector of Ivychurch, and on the afternoon of Christmas Day she took out her bicycle and rode over to the village.

Still, as when last she rode down its street, it seemed asleep or dead. She leaned her bicycle against the wall at the old spot. The air struck cold, and she took her cloth cape from the handle-bar and went up to the church, through the litter of planks and stones, mortar, and dead ashes, that disfigured the grassy mounds of the churchyard. A ladder leaned against one of the tombstones, and round the tower was a network of scaffolding poles.

"So my letter did wake him up!" she thought, with a thrill of triumph.

To the inside of the church a greater change had come. The pews and the oval texts were cleared away. The stove no longer straggled in the lady-chapel, but stood in a corner, almost hidden by a new screen of carved wood, its chimney retiring decently through the wall behind. In the lady-chapel was an altar, and there were flowers. The rest of the church was given over to a cleanly desolation, but in the lady-chapel were fresh green wreaths and garlands, because it was Christmas time. And, fixing up a wreath of yew that had fallen from its nail, was a figure in black. The early dusk of the December day was closing in, but a chill, pink light shone through a window on the face. And Alexa recognised the stranger

with whom she had picnicked in the golden afternoon of September.

He turned and came towards her, and she saw that his dress was that of an English clergyman.

"You?" he said softly.

"They have begun to restore, then?" she said, "and you have come down here at Christmas? How strange!"

Instinctively she had turned from the corner where, with flowers and carpets and evergreens, faith seemed to have grown vital, material, and walked into the barren barrenness of the middle aisle.

"I live here," he said. "We have found all sorts of wonderful things. I knew we should. I must show you everything; but it is too dark. Are you staying here long?"

"I shall be about here for a few days. I didn't know you were in orders."

"I know you didn't. Do you remember that strange little turret? We couldn't make it out, you recollect. Well, it leads to the crypt—pure Norman—the most perfect thing."

"I should like to see that."

"There are candlesticks down there. They're underpinning the walls."

He opened the door of the little turret, and a dark hole in the ground showed a hint of steps leading down.

"It was all bricked up," he said. "Mind how you go. Let me light a match. The stairs are quite sound."

He struck a vesta and she followed him down.

When they reached the crypt he lighted candle after candle and stuck them on the ledges of the walls.

"There!" he said; "isn't it magnificent?"

"I feel a little bewildered," she said. "I thought Ivychurch had no friends, and now I find it on its way to the high places of honour. I thought you were a tourist and——"

"It's being done most carefully," he went on irrelevantly; "nothing will be spoiled. It was the flannels, I suppose. I can't get out of the way of wearing them in the summer. As soon as the walls are safe, and the roof, we shall go on to explore behind the lath and plaster. I think there's original colouring on some of the walls. Look at the groining of this roof and the scalloped—ah——"

A sudden, sharp crack, followed by a thundering sound of falling masonry. The crypt

seemed to shake, and all the candles went out. There followed a deep silence.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Her voice came through the darkness, tremulous, but only a very little.

The sharp, sudden spurt of flame from the match as he struck it showed him a white face and frightened eyes, but the mouth was set firmly.

He lighted one of the candles.

"What is it?" she said.

"The stair has fallen in, I think," he answered quietly, and went to see. Through the low arch by which they had entered the base of a mound of masonry now protruded.

"Hold the candle," he said, and crept over the heap and out of sight. Then a hand reached back for the candle.

"Here, give me the light."

She gave it, half kneeling on the broken masonry to reach his outstretched fingers. The little glimmer of the candle through the archway seemed to draw the darkness towards it, and Alexa felt it pressing behind her like a tangible presence. After a while he called to her to take the candle, and then came scrambling back over the broken stone and rubble. His black coat was covered with white dust, and his hair was rumpled and had cobwebs in it, she noticed.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"Well," he answered, looking at her in a dazed way. He took the candle again and held it all on one side so that the melted grease ran down over his hand. "Suppose we were to sit down. You'll be tired standing so long."

"What has happened?"

"I hope you're not afraid of the dark," he said. "I don't suppose I shall be able to get you out alive, and you don't even know my name, and—I beg your pardon, I think I am dreaming." He set the candle on a ledge and began to walk up and down, holding his head in his hands. Alexa wondered if the candle-grease on his hand had hardened yet, or if it would come off on his hair. She wondered why she did not feel cold. It was frosty outside, she remembered. She longed to take the man by the shoulders and shake the truth out of him. Suddenly he stopped in his walk and spoke in his natural voice.

"I don't know what I've been saying. Forgive me if I talked nonsense. It was rather a shock to think that I had led you into this—you, of all people. Now I'm sane again. I'll tell you exactly what has

happened. As far as I can make out, the wall of the staircase has given way. I suppose the underpinning of the other wall has shaken it. Or perhaps it was bricked up all those years ago because they knew it wasn't safe. The workmen won't come near the place till after to-morrow, and perhaps not then; you know they are never in a hurry to get to work after Bank Holiday. There's nothing to be done."

"It is rather bad," she said, "but we must hold on and keep up our courage. The village is all round us—quite close; someone will hear if we shout."

"The village is quite close—yes," he said.

"But the dead people lie thick between," she went on, "and no one can expect them to carry messages. Now I'm talking nonsense, too. But someone will come into the church, or they will miss you and come to look."

He did not tell her that they would not miss him because he had come into the church on his way to Canterbury—where he had meant to spend a few quiet days among the old books. He only said, "If you left the church door open there is a chance."

"Yes," she said quickly, "I did leave it open." But she lied. She could not bear to add to the torment which she saw consumed him at the thought of the doom he had brought on her.

"You're quite right," she said presently. "We ought to sit down and try not to think—if you are quite sure there is no other way out."

"There is none," he answered briefly. "I know every inch of the place."

"Well," she said, and her voice was steady, cheerful even, "I suppose if anyone came into the church we should hear them, and they'd hear us if we shouted."

"Possibly. Sound travels in strange ways. You are good. Most women would have been screaming and calling me names before this."

She laughed. "You don't know 'most women,'" she said. And he was more grateful to her for her laugh than for all the other manifestations of her courage. As, indeed, he had reason to be.

They sat down and each made the strong effort needed to talk of other things than this burial, this death in life.

She told him of her childhood, and of her schooldays, of her struggles against poverty, and her early, timid, hardly hoped-for successes, and he questioned and listened. But after a while pauses dropped like stones into



"Look at the groining of this roof."

the pool of her speech, and presently fell so fast that the pool was dried up and silence was between them.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, after a long time.

"Not a bit. I have some biscuits in my pocket, if *you* are."

"No," he said. "Oh, no. I was only thinking. I must explore a bit."

He left her sitting there and examined the litter of tools and odd things left by the workmen. He found half a dozen empty sacks that had held cement or such things, and an old coat, probably the foreman's working garment. He took off his own coat and put on this tweed jacket, with the rounded shoulders and that smell of putty which hangs about the clothes of all workmen, whatever be their trade. He arranged the sacks in one of the little side chapels. "They will do to cover her if she sleeps," he thought. "Pray God she may sleep."

Then he went back to her.

"You're to have my coat," he said. "I've got another." She submitted. Then he talked to her awhile and told her many things. At ten o'clock he wound up his watch and asked her if she could sleep.

"It's very odd," she said, "but I believe I could."

He led her to the little chapel and showed her the sacks. She insisted on dividing them with him. He took his share to the other chapel and lay down. To his surprise he found dreams taking hold of him almost before he had said to himself that he could never sleep. He fell asleep praying for her, and when he awoke it was six o'clock, and he heard her moving and saw the gleam of a lighted candle.

"I have found a pail of water," she cried in answer to his greeting, "and it tastes all right. Come and have breakfast."

They each had a biscuit and some of the water, and talked of the possibilities of rescue till they dared not to talk of them any more. Then she asked him if he could remember the morning prayers, and she listened to the beautiful words and schooled her heart to patience and courage. "If the worst comes," she said, "I shall not die alone. He is a man. Suppose I had been condemned to die in this den with a coward!"

III.

THIS was the second day, and of the length of that day there are not words enough in all English to tell the tale. The two talked and

were silent, they walked and sat and dozed a little, and the hours were like weeks and the minutes like hours. There were eight biscuits, and that evening they ate two more. And he felt giddy and sick with fasting, and with fear and with sorrow, but his fears and his sorrow were for her. For himself, he felt only how hard it was to have brought this horror on this woman—the ideal woman, the woman who could look death in the face and not flinch.

It was on the evening of the second day that she said—

"If we have got to die, I should like to hold your hand. I am getting a little frightened, and I don't like that chapel where the sacks are. I think someone walks there. That is a tomb at the side, and, besides, the dead people are all around us—close, quite close." So he held her hand and she slept against his shoulder. They had been buried for two days and two nights when, for the first time, to ears strained with silence, came a footfall overhead.

"Shout!" she whispered hoarsely, and he shouted. With trembling hands she lighted one of the candles—they had been sparing of them through these long hours—and brought him the pail. "Drink!" she said; "you have no voice. Drink and shout;" and while he drank she shrieked, "Help! Stop! Listen!"

"Look up," she said. "I would not worry you by telling you—there's a crack—no, go on shouting, you can hear all the same—there's a crack—I have seen the light through it—in the roof over there."

A voice answered their shouting. "Who's there?" it cried.

"We're buried! Fetch someone to dig us out. Go at once—we're starving—been here three days in the crypt. Stairs blocked. Go, for God's sake!" The footsteps above hurried heavily away.

Then he looked at her and she broke into wild sobbing. "Oh, we're *not* going to die," she cried. "We're going to live. I didn't want to die. But I *was* good, wasn't I? Oh, say I was good and brave," and with that she fainted quietly away.

* * * * *

"See what comes of leaving church doors unlocked," he said, a few hours later, when, warmed and fed, they sat beside the rectory fire waiting for the carriage that was to take Alexa back to her lodging in the little inn. "If that tramp hadn't crept in for warmth——"

"Don't," she said; "I'm afraid to think of it. I believe I shall be afraid now all my life."

"You won't. Fear won't live long with you, you brave woman. When am I to see you again?"

"I don't know. Some day, perhaps."

"The world is small, as you said once. Are you going to cast me off because I am the rector, and you know now who it was that you wrote that letter to? Your letter had nothing to do with the restoration. I always meant to do it from the first. That day I saw you was my first day here. Oh, forgive me for being a rector!"

Here his grim housekeeper announced that the fly from the "Dragon" was waiting.

"Let it wait!" he said impatiently. The old woman retreated muttering and he stood up, a little unsteadily.

"Do you know," he said, "I find I can't let you go, unless you promise to come back. I can't do without you."

She looked at him. "Do you mean——?"

"I didn't mean to speak now. I didn't say a word, did I, when we were down there among the dead people? I meant to try and make you love me, if ever we got out. Oh, yes; I meant to wait years for your answer! But I can't wait an hour. Tell me you'll marry me. Dear, dear, dear one! I can't let you go."

"You must be mad," she said, looking at

him doubtfully. "How can I promise to marry you, a perfect stranger?"

He flushed and for a moment he was silent, tasting the bitterness of the conventional phrase. Then he laughed.

"A perfect stranger!" he said. "And we have sat hand in hand and looked Death in the eyes! Do you suppose we could know each other half so well if we'd been meeting each other for years at parties and dinners? You don't know. Is it nothing to you? Am I nothing to you? Answer me! Has any other man shown you his heart and soul as I have done in these long hours and hours?"

"No!" she faltered; "but——"

"And no other man," he said masterfully, "shall ever know your soul as I know it."

"Is it that you really care?" she asked, reaching out a trembling hand to him, "or is it only that you think you ought?"

He caught her hand and laughed again.

"You may go now," he said. "Let me wrap you up in shawls and things. In March—not a day later—you will come back to me. We shall be very happy. Oh, my dear, brave little woman, my own soul! And you will forgive me for being a rector, and we shall be together all our happy lives. We shall be happier than anyone else in the world."

"Oh, well!" she said, "if you think so——"

